CONSUMER ATTITUDE TOWARDS eWOM COMMUNICATION ACROSS DIGITAL CHANNELS

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ABSTRACT

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is an important communication tool. Few studies have identified that consumer attitude towards electronic word of mouth varies across digital channels. The understanding of digital channels and eWOM communication helps companies to become more customer-centric. The objective was to develop a better understanding of consumer attitude towards eWOM digital channels and find the preferred digital channel with favourable attitude. The relationship between attitude and its antecedents in eWOM digital channels were analysed using correlation analysis. In addition, the significance of the relationship was analysed using chi square test. Research findings revealed that consumer attitude varies across digital channels. Social Media and Retail websites received favourable attitude and preferred by respondents. Blogs received low attitude for eWOM communications. Research suggests that forums are more effective to enhance message credibility. Social media can be used to create informative and entertaining campaigns, and to enhance brand attitude. The managerial implication and suggestions were provided for practitioners.

KEYWORDS: Electronic word of mouth (eWOM), Attitudes, Word of mouse, Digital channels, online word of mouth

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INTRODUCTION

Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is a persuasive and effective tool for building brand awareness, creating hype in the market. It also influences purchase decisions and loyalty (Arif, 2019). Consumers consider electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as one of the most useful information sources because it consists of opinion, experiences, and advice from past consumers (Mazzarol *et al.*, 2007; Munnukka *et al.*, 2015). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is defined as “eWOM is the dynamic and ongoing information exchange process between potential, actual, or former consumers regarding a product, service, brand, or company, which is available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet” (Ismagilova *et al.*, 2017). The features of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) are speed, reach, convenience, and lack of face-to-face communication. Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) is also an important source of consumer expectation (Edwards *et al.*, 2009). Most of eWOM communication takes place between strangers beyond geographical limitations, which are weak ties. While traditional word of mouth takes place between relatives, friends, which are strong ties (King *et al.*, 2014).

Due to the development of the internet and technology, new ways of communication are developed for people to connect (Goyette *et al.*, 2010). The newly developed communication channels are blogs, email, online forums, recommendation sites, online comment boards, digital virtual world, social networking sites, shopping websites etc.

(Brown *et al.*, 2007; Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2010; Li & Zhan, 2011; Libai *et al.*, 2010). Electronic word of mouth (eWOM) spreads through different platforms such as email, instant messaging, forums, review sites, online communities, blogs, etc. and the context is computer-mediated and complex (Dwyer *et al.*, 2007; King *et al.*, 2014).

Hu and Ha (2015) categorized electronic word of mouth (eWOM) as four classes namely Specialized eWOM, Social eWOM, Affiliated eWOM, and Miscellaneous eWOM. Specialized eWOM refers to the customers' reviews or comments that are posted on rating websites but there is no selling of products on rating websites. The examples of specialized eWOM websites are Epinions, Mouthshut, and Yelp etc. Social eWOM refers to comments, reviews, or information about a product/brand on Social media. Examples of social eWOM are Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn etc. Miscellaneous eWOM includes platforms such as blogs, forums, discussion boards where information about a product/brand is exchanged. With all these technologies, we can be more customer-centric. To become more customer-centric, it is important to learn whether the consumer attitude varies across different digital channels. The two objectives were to find the preferred digital channel of consumers for eWOM communication and to understand the relationship between the consumer attitude and its antecedents across eWOM digital channels.

LITERATURE REVIEW

eWOM is “the knowledge exchange that consumers carry out online” (Wu & Wang, 2011). Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) defined eWOM as “any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual, or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet”. Chatterjee (2001) defined “eWOM is a type of communication which can take the form of reviews such as user comments, ratings, numerical scale evaluations, or videos”.

e-WOM is one of the most effective factors influencing brand image and purchase intention of brands in consumer markets (Jalilvand & Samiei, 2012). Consumer reviews have an impact on the decision-making of consumers (S. H. Kim *et al.*, 2013). Consumers read and rely on consumer reviews (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006). Customers use electronic word of mouth for the reduction of the potential hazards when decision making before buying products (Hussain *et al.*, 2017). It has the potential to impact perceptions or actions (Sweeney *et al.*, 2008).

eWOM on Digital Channel helps to reduce risk in a purchase, and prevent bad experience (Khammash & Griffiths, 2011). Digital channels have different features and different appeals that influence consumer attitudes towards electronic word of mouth communication (Gvili & Levy, 2016). Digital channels have different characteristics. Social Networks and online communities are used to share information (Cheung *et al.*, 2008). Chat and text messages are intimate and immediate. Some channels such as online comment boards have members remain anonymous. Some channels such as forums have credibility by acknowledging the source (Steffes & Burgee, 2009). Kudeshia and Kumar (2017) found that social electronic word of mouth generated through social media websites affect and have influence on brand attitude and purchase intention.

4.2 Attitude Towards eWOM Communication

Attitude is a significant positive predictor of consumer's Web advertising behaviour and purchase intention (Saadeghvaziri *et al.*, 2013). Perloff (2020) defined attitude, as “Attitude is a very complex, hypothetical construct. It is a state of mind that can be changed by persuasion but only be inferred by observing people's responses elicited by stimuli”. Attitude towards electronic word of mouth is considered as a significant antecedent to understand people's response to the messages (Gvili

& Levy, 2016).

Ducoffe (1996) and Brackett and Carr (2001) provided informativeness, irritation, value, entertainment, and credibility as antecedents of attitude. Research found that argument quality, source credibility, source attractiveness, source perception, and source style has influences on social media users' attitudes and intentions (Teng *et al.*, 2017). A study shown that the attitude of consumers towards eWOM varies across digital channels (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

Informativeness in advertising means that consumers are informed about product alternatives and help them make informed decisions (Ducoffe, 1996). Informativeness refers to the presence of informational content in advertising messages. Digital message Informativeness is positively related to advertising value (Dix *et al.*, 2012; Y. J. Kim & Han, 2014; Van-Tien Dao *et al.*, 2014) and attitude towards the advertisement (Goodrich *et al.*, 2015). Informativeness means that the digital channels have good and relevant product information. It is provided on time (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

Entertainment digital messages reduce intrusiveness and increase positive attitude towards message and platform (Chang *et al.*, 2013). Entertainment is the ability of eWOM messages to provide escapism, emotional release, and diversion (Ducoffe, 1996; McQuail, 1987). Entertainment and informativeness are two properties of electronic word of mouth messages that can characterize consumer behaviour online (Babin *et al.*, 1994; Cotte *et al.*, 2006). In digital communications, the perceived value of the message correlates with both entertainment and informativeness (Dix *et al.*, 2012; Van-Tien Dao *et al.*, 2014). Research study suggests that individuals share or forward messages or content that they find to be entertaining and fun (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Irritation is the ability of the eWOM message to cause insult, annoyance, or offense (Ducoffe, 1996). Irritation leads to message scepticism and avoidance of digital messages (Baek & Morimoto, 2012). From the perspective of the receiver, the speed and ease of eWOM message creation may lead to annoyance and clutter (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). Irritation tends to annoy and insults people's intelligence. Irritating messages has a positive influence on Consumer attitude toward the channel (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

Value is the subjective evaluation of consumers based on the utility or worth of the received eWOM messages (Ducoffe, 1995). Studies suggest that the value of eWOM messages is the outcome of irritation, entertainment, credibility, and informativeness (Van-Tien Dao *et al.*, 2014). It also affects attitude towards message positively (Brackett & Carr, 2001). Value shows usefulness and importance of eWOM messages (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

The credibility of electronic word of mouth messages is the consumers' perception towards recommendations, reviews or, comments as to believe it or not (Nabi & Hendriks, 2003). It improves value and attitude (Clarkson *et al.*, 2008). It is also a key determinant of eWOM adoption (Fan & Miao, 2012). Credibility involves trustworthiness and believability of eWOM messages (Gvili & Levy, 2016). Credibility is a mediator of message value. Credibility affects consumer attitude toward eWOM messages in social networking sites (Gvili & Levy, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected through an interview schedule. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling (Convenience Sampling). The study area for research purpose was Coimbatore City. One hundred and fifty responses were interviewed for the study. The participants were informed that the study was voluntary and information provided will be

used only for academic purposes.

The eWOM digital platforms selected for the study were Email, Forum, Social Media, SMS, Blog, Rating Websites, and Retail Sites. These are the seven major eWOM major communication channels (Gvili & Levy, 2016; Hu & Ha, 2015). Attitude towards eWOM communication consists of five antecedents. The antecedents were entertainment, informativeness, irritation, value, and credibility (Brackett & Carr, 2001; Ducoffe, 1996). The antecedents and general attitude towards seven major eWOM communication channels were collected from respondents.

All the items were measured using the multiple response questions. Respondents were asked to select platforms for items such as attitude, entertainment, informativeness, irritation, value, and credibility. Frequency analysis, Pearson Chi square test (test the level of significance), and phi coefficient correlation (level of dependence) were conducted using SPSS. Rea and Parker (1992) classified the Phi correlation as follows: .00 & under 0.10 is Negligible, 0.10 & under 0.20 is weak, 0.20 & under 0.40 is moderate, 0.40 & under 0.60 is relatively strong, 0.60 & under 0.80 is strong, and 0.80 and 1 is very strong.

RESULTS

The Frequency analysis was conducted to understand the demographic profile of the respondents. Majority of the respondents were male (59.3 per cent) and majority of the respondents age ranged between 18 and 25 years (44.7 per cent). About 25.3 per cent of respondents earned monthly income between Rs. 30,001 – Rs. 40,000. Majority of the respondents (63.3 per cent) were graduates. Overall, the participants were younger and well educated (Table 1)

Table 1: Demographic Profile of respondents

Demographics	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	61	40.7
	Male	89	59.3
Age	18 - 25	66	44.7
	26 - 35	31	20.7
	36 - 45	19	12.7
	46 - 55	21	14
	Above 55	12	8
Income per month	Below Rs.10,000	6	4
	Rs. 10,001 - 20,000	7	4.7
	Rs. 20,001 - 30,000	31	20.7
	Rs. 30,001 - 40,000	38	25.3
	Rs. 40,001 - 50,000	20	13.3
	Above Rs. 50,000	33	22
	No Income	15	10
Education	Diploma	3	2
	High School	2	1.3

	Undergraduate	95	63.3
	Postgraduate	50	33.3

Consumer Attitude across eWOM digital channels

Table 2 summarizes the attitude towards eWOM messages across digital channels. Majority of the respondents had a favourable attitude towards eWOM messages on social media platforms (59 per cent) and retail websites (59 per cent). Blogs (14 per cent) and Forum (17 per cent) were low in attitude towards eWOM messages. eWOM messages received through Blogs (47 per cent), Rating websites (47 per cent), and Social media (44 per cent) were found to be informative. SMS (29 per cent) scored low on informativeness of eWOM messages. Majority of the respondents found eWOM messages received through the Retail website (46 per cent) and Rating websites (41 per cent) were valuable. SMS (19 per cent) got low on value. Retail website (38 per cent) scored high on eWOM message credibility. SMS (8 per cent), Social media (12 per cent), forum (14 per cent), and Blogs (15 per cent) scored low on credibility.

Majority of the respondents (61 per cent) found social media entertaining. Retail Website (9 per cent), SMS (6 per cent), and Rating sites (11 per cent) are low on entertainment. Most of the Respondents (49 per cent) felt irritated by eWOM messages received through SMS. Respondents felt less irritated by Rating websites (17 per cent), Retail websites (17 per cent), and Blogs (17 per cent). Based on Table 2, it was observed that the consumer attitude varied across different eWOM digital channels. The features and form of digital channels changed the consumer attitude towards eWOM messages.

Table 2: Consumer Attitude across eWOM digital channels

Digital eWOM channels	Attitude		Informativeness		Value		Credibility		Entertainment		Irritation	
	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent	n	per cent
Social Media	89	59	66	44	36	24	18	12	92	61	35	23
Rating Website	33	22	70	47	61	41	33	22	16	11	26	17
Retail Website	89	59	58	39	69	46	57	38	13	9	25	17
Forum	26	17	62	41	46	31	21	14	19	13	29	19
Blogs	21	14	70	47	39	26	22	15	29	19	25	17
Email	56	37	59	39	40	27	28	19	27	18	48	32
SMS	42	28	44	29	28	19	12	8	9	6	73	49
Note: Multiple response table, n = 150; n - Frequency and per cent - Percentage												

Relationship between eWOM platforms attitude and its antecedents

Table 3 summarizes the relationship observed between eWOM platforms attitude and its antecedents. It provides the degree of dependence and test of significance to understand the relationship. In Social Media, Informativeness ($\phi = 0.242$) and Entertainment ($\phi = 0.207$) had a moderate positive relationship and significant impact on consumer attitude. Value in Social media had a significant and weak positive relationship ($\phi = 0.179$) with consumer attitude.

In the case of rating websites, Informativeness had a significant impact and a weak positive relationship ($\phi = 0.181$) with consumer attitude. Value was also found to have a significant and moderate positive relationship ($\phi = 0.248$) with consumer attitude. Credibility was also found to have a significant impact and a moderate positive relationship ($\phi = 0.262$) on consumer attitude towards rating websites. In review websites, Credibility had a significant impact and a moderate positive relationship ($\phi = 0.201$) with consumer attitude. Value was also found to have a significant and moderate positive relationship ($\phi = 0.274$) with consumer attitude.

The test results observed were insignificant in email. Attitude and its antecedents do not have evidence to suggest a relationship in the case of email. In Forum, credibility was found to have a weak positive relationship ($\phi = 0.171$) with consumer attitude. The other antecedents were insignificant. The results showed that informativeness ($\phi = 0.162$) and value ($\phi = 0.286$) had a moderate positive and significant impact on the consumer attitude in Blogs.

In SMS, it was evident that informativeness ($\phi = 0.25$) and value ($\phi = 0.273$) had a significant and moderate positive relationship with attitude. It was observed that the relationship between attitude and its antecedents varies depending on the digital eWOM channels.

Table 3: Phi Correlation Analysis and test of significance (Pearson chi square test)

Phi Correlation Coefficient	Social Media	Rating Websites	Retail Websites	Email	Forum	Blogs	SMS
Attitude - Informative	0.242**	0.181*	0.1	0.169	0.045	0.162*	0.25**
Attitude - Entertainment	0.207*	0.077	0.083	0.141	0.016	0.003	0.093
Attitude - Credibility	0.139	0.262**	0.201*	0.019	0.171*	0.05	0.035
Attitude - Value	0.179*	0.248**	0.274**	0.189	0.039	0.286**	0.273**
Attitude - Irritation	0.121	0.012	0.03	0.116	0.046	0.129	0.102
Note: p-value of chi square test; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$							

CONCLUSIONS

The result showed that consumers preferred social media platforms and retail websites. These digital platforms scored high on consumer attitude. The other channels such as Blogs and Forum suffered from low consumer attitude. The differences in digital channels influence consumer attitudes. Users who seek advice from the experts usually visit the forum. The users are usually goal-oriented and the members of the forum are subject matter experts of a particular interest (Shih *et al.*, 2015). Forum is perceived as less irritating and entertaining channels (Gvili & Levy, 2016). The result from the correlation analysis showed that forum was found to be credible digital channels. The credibility is due to the professional and experts who act as moderators of the forum (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

Social Media platforms allow users to share information (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The results showed that social media was informative, entertaining, and valuable. It is due to the anonymous users who create a rich source of rapid information (Erkan & Evans, 2018). Entertainment creates a positive environment and experience for consumers (Schulze *et al.*, 2014). Social media is also perceived as a high-value digital platform (Gvili & Levy, 2016).

SMS is used to communicate short and instant messages. The result found that consumer attitude was low in SMS which explains the low credibility. Nevertheless, it was found to be useful and informative. On the other hand, blogs include detailed and refined messages. It was also found to be valuable and informative. However, people consider blogs less

credible while receiving product information.

Consumer reviews from retail or shopping website are anonymous and shown to have detailed information. The eWOM messages on shopping websites or retail websites are more influential on online purchase intention (Erkan & Evans, 2018). The result showed that retail sites were informative, credible, and valuable. Research suggested that shopping websites were more influential than social media due to their informativeness, usefulness, and credibility. Rating websites have reviews of products provided by the platform's users and consumers. It is a specialized eWOM and the channel does not involve in product selling. Results suggested that rating websites were informative, credible, and useful.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Marketers should adjust their strategy according to their marketing objectives. The strategy should also be adjusted to the digital channel. Marketers can improve consumers' attitudes towards their brand by focusing on message delivery through social media. To reach consumers with informative and timely messages, SMS and Social Media can be used. When the credibility or trustworthiness of messages are concerned, marketers can use forums.

Marketers who seek to develop entertainment campaigns can make use of social media, which was found to be highly informative and entertaining. It is also best to select digital platforms that are valuable and found credible by target consumers. Engagement through digital channels tends to improve brand relationship. The marketers in their websites can use the positive eWOM shared by the consumers. This is known as testimonial advertising. Testimonial advertising is also found to more persuasive and effective in eWOM communication (Bickart & Schindler, 2001).

The eWOM messages that are generated online can be used for data analysis to gain insights and understand consumer behaviour. The marketers to understand eWOM messages can use sentiment analysis, topic modelling, and content analysis etc. Marketers can also make use of web care. Web care is, "the act of engaging in online interactions with (complaining) consumers, by actively searching the web to address consumer feedback (e.g., questions, concerns and complaints)" (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012). Web care is helpful in positively influencing consumers with exposure to negative reviews (Van Noort & Willemsen, 2012).

Limitations and Further Research

The study was conducted under the notion that eWOM communication varies across digital channels. The intensity of usage and expectation of users may vary across different eWOM channels. Other new digital channels and applications can be studied and understand the impact on consumers attitudes. The impact of eWOM digital channels can be studied across different product categories. The impact of eWOM digital channels on actual sales can help in building good media strategies.

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